

Anxious Realism and Cosmic Rock: Parallels Between John Brosio's Art and David Bowie's Music

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John Brosio and David Bowie, though working in vastly different artistic mediums, share an extraordinary ability to blend the familiar with the surreal, creating works that challenge perceptions and evoke deep reflection. Brosio's paintings depict unsettling juxtapositions of mundane suburban settings disrupted by apocalyptic scenarios, such as tornadoes and dinosaurs, evoking what has been termed "anxious realism." Similarly, Bowie's music, often paired with his contributions to visual and cinematic art, merges conventional rock structures with avant-garde experimentation, exploring themes of alienation, transformation, and the tension between order and chaos. Bowie's haunting song *Cat People (Putting Out Fire)*, for instance, mirrors Brosio's use of unsettling contrasts, exploring the primal instincts that lie beneath modern life. This paper delves into the thematic and stylistic parallels between Brosio and Bowie, examining how both artists disrupt the norm to provoke contemplation of existential questions. By exploring their shared emphasis on humanity's fragility and the extraordinary hidden within the ordinary, the study highlights their enduring cultural significance and potential for cross-disciplinary inspiration.

Keywords: John Brosio, David Bowie, anxious realism, cosmic rock, surrealism, existential dread, primal instincts, transformation, Cat People, avant-garde, juxtaposition, fine art, music, visual art, cross-disciplinary art, alienation, suburban surrealism, cultural impact.

I. Introduction

In the realm of creative expression, certain artists manage to transcend the boundaries of their medium, creating works that resonate across disciplines and connect with universal themes of humanity. John Brosio, a painter known for his masterful blending of surrealism and realism, crafts scenes where the mundane and the extraordinary collide, creating a palpable sense of unease. David Bowie, a cultural icon and innovator in music and film, similarly broke conventions with his enigmatic persona and experimental approach to art. Among his many ventures, Bowie's contribution to the film *Cat People* (1982)—through both his haunting theme song and the movie's evocative visuals—stands as a vivid example of his ability to use imagery and sound to confront themes of transformation, alienation, and the primal forces lurking beneath human identity.

This paper examines the striking parallels between Brosio's paintings and Bowie's multifaceted artistic output, particularly focusing on the surreal and unsettling elements that pervade their work. Brosio's canvases often depict ordinary suburban landscapes disrupted by surreal catastrophes, such as dinosaurs roaming through parking lots or tornadoes threatening tranquil neighborhoods. These juxtapositions evoke a sense of fragility and existential dread, forcing viewers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and the unpredictability of existence. Similarly, Bowie's music and cinematic presence—including his contributions to *Cat People*—push boundaries, intertwining the ordinary with the extraordinary. In *Cat People*, themes of animalistic transformation and suppressed instinctual urges blend with urban modernity, creating a visceral and otherworldly narrative that aligns closely with the tensions present in Brosio's paintings.

Both Brosio and Bowie share a fascination with surrealism and unsettling contrasts, using their art to delve into themes of alienation, existential dread, and humanity's tenuous grip on the world around them. Their works provoke deep reflection, offering glimpses of beauty amidst chaos and highlighting the fragility of human constructs. Whether through Brosio's vivid yet disquieting depictions of natural disasters or Bowie's haunting melodies paired with primal, feral imagery, both artists illuminate the tension between the familiar and the extraordinary.

Moreover, both have made profound cultural impacts, each in their respective fields. Brosio's contributions to contemporary art redefine the boundaries of fine art by integrating surrealism with hyper-realistic techniques, challenging viewers to confront their unease. Bowie, on the other hand, revolutionized music and visual storytelling, crafting personas and narratives that inspired countless artists and reshaped the cultural landscape. His work in *Cat People* exemplifies his ability to traverse artistic domains, bridging music, film, and visual symbolism to explore the depths of human emotion and identity.

Through this analysis, the paper seeks to highlight how Brosio and Bowie's works, though different in medium, converge in their exploration of shared existential themes. Their art challenges audiences to confront the unfamiliar and unsettling, urging them to question their understanding of reality, identity, and the unpredictable forces that shape human existence.

II. Thematic Overlaps Between Brosio's Paintings and Bowie's Artistic Vision

Both John Brosio and David Bowie delve into themes that disrupt perceptions of normalcy and force audiences to confront the fragility of human existence. Through their respective mediums, they create surreal, thought-provoking works that challenge societal norms and evoke a sense of unease. This section explores three key thematic overlaps between Brosio's paintings and Bowie's artistic vision: alienation and the disruption of normalcy, the fusion of the ordinary and extraordinary, and the existential dread underlying their works.

A. Alienation and the Disruption of Normalcy

One of the most striking parallels between Brosio's art and Bowie's work lies in their shared exploration of alienation and the disruption of the familiar.

- **John Brosio:** In his paintings, Brosio captures scenes of suburban life that are suddenly and violently interrupted by surreal catastrophes. A placid parking lot becomes the site of a dinosaur attack; an idyllic neighborhood is threatened by an encroaching tornado. These disruptions of the mundane evoke a sense of alienation, as if the ordinary world has betrayed its

inhabitants. The people in Brosio's paintings are often depicted as small and powerless, emphasizing their disconnection from the forces around them and highlighting humanity's precarious place in the universe.

- **David Bowie:** Similarly, Bowie's music and cinematic contributions often center on themes of isolation and alienation. In *Space Oddity*, Major Tom is a poignant figure of existential loneliness, disconnected from both Earth and the cosmos as he drifts into the void. In *Cat People* (1982), Bowie explores alienation on a more visceral level, contributing the haunting track "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" to a film where Paul Gallier, a man struggling with his animalistic instincts, embodies the tension between human identity and primal urges. Gallier's transformation and isolation echo the sense of being estranged from one's surroundings and even from oneself, a theme that resonates deeply in Bowie's work.

B. The Fusion of the Ordinary and Extraordinary

Both Brosio and Bowie excel at juxtaposing the everyday with the extraordinary, creating tension and intrigue through this fusion.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio's hyper-realistic painting style anchors his surreal subjects in a world that feels disturbingly plausible. By rendering surreal elements—such as giant tornadoes or prehistoric creatures—in painstaking detail and placing them within ordinary suburban settings, Brosio creates a dissonance that forces viewers to question the stability of their reality. The clash between the familiar and the fantastical evokes a sense of wonder and dread, suggesting that the extraordinary is always lurking just beneath the surface of the mundane.
- **David Bowie:** In *Cat People*, Bowie's music reinforces the film's central theme: the duality of the ordinary and the primal. His song "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" serves as a haunting anthem for the transformation of ordinary urban characters into something feral and otherworldly. The film juxtaposes modern city life with the savage, animalistic instincts of its characters, reflecting a hidden, extraordinary aspect of humanity that lies just below the surface. Bowie's lyrics and haunting melody underscore this

tension, capturing the essence of duality and transformation. The ordinary and the extraordinary coexist uneasily in Bowie's work, mirroring the dissonance seen in Brosio's art.

C. Existential Dread and the Fragility of Humanity

Underlying the works of both Brosio and Bowie is a shared concern with existential dread and the fragility of human existence.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio's paintings often depict humanity as small and vulnerable in the face of overwhelming natural or surreal forces. The surreal catastrophes in his works—whether they involve rampaging dinosaurs or encroaching tornadoes—symbolize the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of existence. These scenarios confront viewers with the uncomfortable reality of humanity's limitations and the impermanence of the structures we create to shield ourselves from chaos. The existential dread evoked by Brosio's work invites contemplation on the fragility of human life and the illusions of security we cling to.
- **David Bowie:** Similarly, Bowie's music and film imagery frequently explore themes of existential fragility. In *Cat People*, the primal symbolism of the characters' animalistic transformations serves as a metaphor for the fragility of human identity when confronted with instinctual or cosmic forces. Bowie's lyrics in "Cat People" allude to the struggle between control and chaos, suggesting that beneath the veneer of modern civilization lies a raw, uncontrollable force. This theme is consistent with Bowie's broader body of work, which often examines humanity's vulnerability in the face of existential uncertainty.

In both Brosio's paintings and Bowie's artistic vision, these themes converge to create works that challenge audiences to confront the unknown and unsettling aspects of existence. Whether through surreal imagery or haunting melodies, both artists explore the tensions between humanity and the forces that shape and threaten it, leaving their audiences with a profound sense of reflection and unease.

III. Stylistic Comparisons

The stylistic approaches of John Brosio and David Bowie share a remarkable ability to blend contrasting elements, weave layered narratives, and embrace evolution within their respective mediums. Both artists push boundaries and defy traditional conventions, creating works that challenge and inspire their audiences. This section explores three key stylistic comparisons: their use of juxtaposition and contrast, their ability to create layered narratives, and their continuous innovation in their art.

A. Juxtaposition and Contrast

Both Brosio and Bowie masterfully juxtapose opposing elements within their works, creating tension and intrigue through contrast.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio's hyper-realistic painting style heightens the unsettling impact of his surreal imagery. His technique involves rendering everyday objects and settings with meticulous detail, grounding his works in a sense of familiarity. Against this backdrop, he introduces surreal, often chaotic elements—dinosaurs, tornadoes, or other apocalyptic phenomena—that disrupt the serenity of his suburban landscapes. This stark contrast between the mundane and the extraordinary creates a jarring, thought-provoking experience for the viewer. The hyper-reality of the scenes amplifies the surreal elements, making them feel disturbingly plausible and forcing the audience to confront their unease.
- **David Bowie:** Bowie's music similarly thrives on contrast, blending conventional rock structures with avant-garde and experimental sounds. Tracks like "Heroes" juxtapose anthemic, soaring melodies with deeply introspective lyrics, while songs like "Blackstar" integrate jazz influences and dissonant, otherworldly tones into a traditional pop framework. In the film *Cat People*, Bowie's haunting song "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" serves as a sonic counterpart to the movie's visual contrasts, fusing the sleek, urban aesthetics of the film with its primal, feral undercurrents. Through his ability to combine the familiar with the avant-garde, Bowie challenges listeners to reconsider the boundaries of music and art.

B. Narrative Layers

Both Brosio and Bowie are storytellers, crafting works that invite audiences to imagine larger, often speculative narratives beyond what is immediately presented.

- **John Brosio:** Each of Brosio's paintings feels like a snapshot of a larger story frozen in time. His works often capture moments of tension or crisis—a tornado bearing down on a quiet suburb, or a prehistoric predator stalking its prey on a city street. These scenes are imbued with a sense of narrative depth, encouraging viewers to imagine what came before and what might follow. The lack of explicit context heightens the mystery, allowing audiences to project their own interpretations onto the work. Brosio's paintings become speculative worlds in which the ordinary collides with the extraordinary, creating open-ended stories that linger in the viewer's mind.
- **David Bowie:** Bowie's albums often function as conceptual or narrative-driven works, weaving intricate stories across their tracks. In *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Bowie creates the persona of Ziggy Stardust, an androgynous rock star from another world, and charts his rise and eventual fall. Similarly, *Diamond Dogs* presents a dystopian vision inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, blending dark lyrics with theatrical, surreal soundscapes. Bowie's ability to craft layered, immersive worlds mirrors Brosio's approach, with each work standing as part of a larger, imaginative narrative that challenges the audience to engage deeply with the story.

C. Evolution of Approach

Both Brosio and Bowie demonstrate a commitment to innovation, continuously evolving their styles and pushing the boundaries of their respective mediums.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio's work has evolved to seamlessly integrate fine art with surrealist concepts, creating pieces that defy traditional categorization. He embraces experimentation, whether in the scale of his paintings, the

subjects he chooses, or the techniques he employs. Brosio's ability to remain relevant in contemporary art while maintaining his unique voice speaks to his willingness to adapt and innovate. His commitment to exploring new ways of visual storytelling ensures that his work remains fresh and thought-provoking, resonating with audiences across generations.

- **David Bowie:** Few artists have reinvented themselves as frequently and successfully as Bowie. Over the course of his career, he shifted musical styles and visual personas, from the glam rock of Ziggy Stardust to the experimental Berlin Trilogy (*Low*, *"Heroes"*, *Lodger*), and finally to the haunting swan song of *Blackstar*. Each reinvention reflected not only Bowie's artistic growth but also his keen ability to anticipate and influence cultural trends. In *Cat People*, Bowie's foray into cinematic collaboration further demonstrated his versatility and willingness to embrace new forms of artistic expression. His constant evolution inspired countless musicians and artists, cementing his legacy as a cultural icon.

By juxtaposing contrasting elements, weaving layered narratives, and embracing constant evolution, both Brosio and Bowie challenge audiences to expand their understanding of art and its possibilities. Their works invite viewers and listeners to engage deeply, uncover hidden meanings, and explore the uncharted territories of imagination. Whether through a painting or a song, both artists leave an indelible mark, proving that true creativity knows no boundaries.

IV. Emotional and Cultural Impact

John Brosio and David Bowie share a profound ability to engage audiences on an emotional and intellectual level, provoking reflection and reshaping their respective fields. Through their distinctive approaches, they leave lasting cultural legacies, challenging societal norms and pushing the boundaries of creative expression. This section explores how both artists elicit deep reflection and have influenced their respective fields in transformative ways.

A. Eliciting Reflection

One of the most powerful aspects of both Brosio's and Bowie's work is their ability to compel audiences to reflect on existential questions, personal identity, and humanity's place in the larger scheme of existence.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio's paintings provoke a visceral sense of unease by confronting viewers with surreal and apocalyptic scenarios that disrupt familiar settings. By juxtaposing the ordinary—suburban landscapes, parking lots, or quiet homes—with the extraordinary—dinosaurs, tornadoes, and other surreal catastrophes—Brosio forces viewers to grapple with the fragility and unpredictability of life. His work invites contemplation on humanity's tenuous relationship with nature and the limits of human control in the face of chaos. This reflection extends beyond the canvas, prompting viewers to reconsider their assumptions about stability, security, and the underlying forces that shape the world. Brosio's art resonates deeply because it speaks to the universal experience of vulnerability and uncertainty.
- **David Bowie:** Bowie's music and artistic vision inspire reflection on identity, ambiguity, and humanity's broader existential struggles. His existential lyrics—whether in *Space Oddity*, *Heroes*, or *Blackstar*—often pose more questions than answers, encouraging listeners to embrace the complexity and ambiguity of life. In *Cat People*, Bowie's haunting song "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" explores themes of transformation, instinct, and suppressed desires, challenging audiences to reflect on the tension between societal norms and primal urges. Bowie's ability to explore deeply personal and universal themes simultaneously makes his work resonate on multiple levels, encouraging listeners to question their place in the world and consider perspectives beyond traditional boundaries.

Both Brosio and Bowie challenge their audiences to confront uncomfortable truths and embrace the unknown, creating works that transcend mere entertainment or visual appeal to leave a lasting emotional impact.

B. Influence on Their Respective Fields

Both Brosio and Bowie have left indelible marks on their respective disciplines, redefining what it means to create meaningful art and inspiring countless others to follow in their footsteps.

- **John Brosio:** Brosio has redefined contemporary fine art by incorporating themes of surrealism and ecological critique into hyper-realistic painting. His ability to blend meticulous realism with surreal and often unsettling imagery sets him apart from traditional realist painters. By tackling themes such as humanity's vulnerability and the unpredictable power of nature, Brosio has carved a unique niche that resonates with contemporary concerns about climate change, ecological instability, and existential uncertainty. His work has expanded the boundaries of fine art, proving that technical skill and conceptual depth can coexist to create pieces that are both visually stunning and intellectually provocative.
- **David Bowie:** Bowie's influence on music, performance, and visual art is unparalleled. He redefined the boundaries of rock and pop music, blending genres and incorporating elements of theater, film, and visual art into his performances. His fearless approach to experimentation and reinvention—whether through personas like Ziggy Stardust or through his collaborations in cinema, such as his work on *Cat People*—has inspired generations of artists to push the boundaries of their own creativity. Bowie's impact extends beyond music, influencing fashion, visual culture, and even the way society thinks about identity, fluidity, and self-expression. His legacy is one of innovation and transformation, making him a cultural icon whose relevance continues to grow even after his death.

By eliciting reflection and reshaping their respective fields, Brosio and Bowie have created works that transcend time and medium, resonating deeply with audiences and inspiring future generations. Their ability to challenge norms, provoke thought, and connect with universal human experiences ensures their enduring impact on both art and culture. Whether through a surreal painting or a haunting melody, their works invite audiences to explore the complexities of life and the human condition, leaving behind legacies of profound significance.

V. Intersection of Mediums: Music and Visual Art

The interplay between music and visual art is a rich field of exploration, as both mediums have the capacity to evoke deep emotional responses, challenge perceptions, and convey complex themes. While John Brosio works in the realm of painting and David Bowie predominantly in music, their artistic visions intersect in their shared exploration of surrealism, existential dread, and the tension between the mundane and the extraordinary. This section delves into how visual and auditory mediums can convey similar themes and how the works of Brosio and Bowie might inform and expand interpretations of each other.

A. Conveying Similar Themes Through Different Mediums

Both music and visual art can evoke similar emotional and intellectual responses by employing contrasting techniques to explore shared themes.

- **Visual Art (Brosio's Paintings):** Brosio's paintings communicate through static imagery, using realism to ground surreal and apocalyptic elements. The tension between the ordinary (suburban settings) and the extraordinary (dinosaurs, tornadoes) creates a powerful visual metaphor for humanity's vulnerability and the unpredictability of life. The deliberate use of stillness and captured motion allows viewers to pause and reflect, engaging deeply with the layers of meaning and the implied narratives within each piece.
- **Music (Bowie's Work):** Bowie's music, on the other hand, uses sound and lyrics to evoke similar themes, drawing on rhythm, melody, and sonic textures to create emotional landscapes. His haunting lyrics often deal with alienation, transformation, and existential uncertainty, while the dynamic nature of music—its ability to shift in tone and pace—offers a fluid and immersive experience. In his contributions to *Cat People*, for example, Bowie's song "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" pairs primal, driving rhythms with ethereal vocals, mirroring the duality of human civilization and animalistic instinct.

While visual art relies on the power of imagery to convey its message, music engages through auditory stimulation and temporal progression. Both mediums,

however, share the ability to provoke thought and feeling, engaging audiences on multiple sensory and intellectual levels.

B. How Bowie's Music Might Influence an Interpretation of Brosio's Paintings

Bowie's music, with its layered emotional and thematic complexity, offers a unique lens through which Brosio's paintings might be reinterpreted.

- **Amplifying the Emotional Undertones:** The surreal disasters in Brosio's work—such as dinosaurs invading suburban neighborhoods—could take on an even greater sense of tension and dread when paired with the haunting and otherworldly tones of Bowie's music. A track like "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" could underscore the primal and instinctual fear evoked by Brosio's paintings, creating a multisensory experience where the viewer not only sees but also hears the looming chaos.
- **Exploring Themes of Duality and Transformation:** Bowie's recurring exploration of duality, particularly in *Cat People's* narrative of human versus animal instincts, could frame Brosio's surreal imagery as allegorical representations of inner conflict. For instance, a tornado in Brosio's work might symbolize the emotional turbulence within the human psyche, a theme that resonates with Bowie's lyrics about internal struggle and identity.
- **Inviting Speculative Narratives:** Bowie's music often feels cinematic, suggesting stories beyond what is directly presented. Listening to Bowie's albums, such as *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, while viewing Brosio's paintings might inspire audiences to imagine speculative worlds where these surreal catastrophes occur, drawing connections between Brosio's visual chaos and Bowie's existential storytelling.

C. How Brosio's Paintings Might Reframe Bowie's Music and Imagery

Similarly, Brosio's visual work could enrich the interpretation of Bowie's music, particularly his songs and cinematic contributions.

- **Providing a Visual Context for Bowie's Themes:** Brosio's paintings offer vivid imagery that aligns with Bowie's exploration of the surreal and extraordinary. A painting of dinosaurs disrupting suburban tranquility could serve as a visual metaphor for the disruption of societal norms that Bowie often explores in his lyrics. For instance, *Cat People's* themes of hidden instincts and transformation might find a perfect visual counterpart in Brosio's apocalyptic suburban landscapes, where the veneer of civilization is stripped away to reveal chaos.
 - **Deepening Emotional Resonance:** Viewing Brosio's paintings while listening to Bowie's music could amplify the emotional impact of both. The stark imagery of Brosio's work might heighten the tension and alienation expressed in Bowie's lyrics, creating a dialogue between the visual and auditory mediums that enhances the audience's engagement.
 - **Encouraging Interdisciplinary Connections:** Brosio's work might also inspire audiences to see Bowie's music as not just auditory but also deeply visual. Brosio's surrealist techniques could prompt new interpretations of Bowie's songs, imagining them as soundtracks to apocalyptic or transformative scenarios akin to Brosio's painted worlds.
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D. The Potential for Cross-Medium Collaboration

The thematic and stylistic affinities between Brosio and Bowie suggest the potential for cross-medium collaborations, where visual art and music merge to create immersive experiences. For example:

- A multimedia exhibition pairing Brosio's paintings with Bowie's music could invite audiences to explore the intersection of visual and auditory storytelling, deepening their understanding of both artists' works.
 - An experimental film inspired by Brosio's paintings could use Bowie's music as its score, blending surreal visuals with haunting soundscapes to evoke a shared sense of unease and wonder.
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In exploring the intersection of visual and auditory mediums, Brosio and Bowie demonstrate the power of art to transcend its medium and evoke universal themes. Their works, when considered together, invite audiences to engage with both sight and sound, creating a richer, more layered experience that speaks to the complexity of human existence and the surreal forces that shape it.

VI. Conclusion

John Brosio and David Bowie, though working in distinct artistic realms, share a remarkable ability to challenge conventions and provoke deep introspection. Both disrupt the norm, whether through Brosio's surreal yet hyper-realistic depictions of suburban chaos or Bowie's genre-defying music and transformative visual personas. Their works compel audiences to grapple with universal themes of anxiety, beauty, and the unknown, connecting them to deeper truths about humanity and the forces that shape our existence.

At the heart of their artistry lies a shared commitment to exploring the fragility of human identity and the precarious balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Brosio's paintings, with their meticulous attention to realism juxtaposed with surreal catastrophes, force viewers to confront the unpredictability of life and their own vulnerabilities. Bowie's music and cinematic contributions, such as his haunting work in *Cat People*, inspire listeners to embrace ambiguity, fluidity, and transformation, while his lyrics often ponder existential questions that resonate on a universal scale. Both artists draw their audiences into a world where the boundaries between reality and imagination blur, offering an unsettling yet profoundly beautiful reflection on the human condition.

The cultural significance of Brosio and Bowie cannot be overstated. Brosio redefines fine art by blending technical mastery with surrealist themes that critique humanity's relationship with nature and the chaos that lies beneath the surface of everyday life. Bowie, through his fearless reinvention of himself and his art, shattered the boundaries of rock and pop music, influencing countless artists across disciplines and leaving an indelible mark on popular culture. Together, their works serve as a testament to the power of creativity to challenge perceptions, evoke emotion, and inspire reflection.

Looking ahead, the intersection of Brosio's and Bowie's creative legacies presents a fertile ground for cross-disciplinary exploration. Future studies might delve deeper into how music and visual art can complement and amplify one another, drawing inspiration from the thematic and stylistic parallels between these two figures. For example, collaborative exhibitions pairing Brosio's paintings with Bowie's music could create immersive experiences that engage multiple senses, offering audiences a more holistic understanding of their shared themes. Similarly, academic research could explore how the integration of auditory and visual elements can evoke complex emotional and intellectual responses, using Brosio and Bowie as case studies for the transformative potential of interdisciplinary art.

In a world increasingly dominated by fragmented and fleeting cultural experiences, the works of Brosio and Bowie remind us of the enduring power of art to connect us to our shared humanity. Their ability to evoke reflection and inspire wonder ensures that their legacies will continue to resonate, encouraging future generations to explore the uncharted territories of creativity and imagination. As we consider their contributions, we are reminded that the boundaries between mediums, like the boundaries between reality and imagination, are meant to be crossed.

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